

# Black leaders concerned about losing power

It's rare when Atlanta politicians talk frankly, especially in public, about race and power.

So, Mayor Shirley Franklin's candid assessment last week that African-Americans are in danger of losing their Atlanta political base marks an important threshold in the evolution of one of the first American cities to be governed almost exclusively by black leaders.

It suggests that the demographic changes happening within the growing city population portend a time, very soon, when blacks will have to share much more power with whites — not unlike the reversal of fortune the city's white politicians faced when a young Maynard Jackson was elected mayor 35 years ago.

And on a base level, it might explain, in part, the motivation behind the radio ad last year by Franklin, U.S. Rep. John Lewis and former Mayor Andrew Young, exhorting Fulton County residents to vote for black county commission candidates or risk bringing back the days when fire hoses and attack dogs were turned on



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black Americans demanding voting rights.

The images conjured up in the radio ad — that the days of Jim Crow might return in Fulton County if blacks surrender power to whites — were reckless and irresponsible.

The mayor's most recent assessment of Atlanta politics was much more subtle. But the theme was similar.

Franklin, speaking at an urban affairs symposium in Washington, noted that "there are concerns" about the loss of African-American political dominance in the city, which once had a minority population that was pushing 70 percent. Blacks still represent 58.6 percent of the city's population, but much of Atlanta's growth over the last 15 years — when it went from less than 400,000 people to more than 470,000 — has

been fueled by whites. With nearly all the city's public housing demolished and its population dispersed around the metro area, the two races could reach a rough parity in the next five to 10 years.

It's important to note here that Franklin wasn't lamenting that trend line. But she and other black leaders clearly are concerned about it. It routinely comes up in private conversations.

Since Jackson's rise to power, political decisions in Atlanta, and to some degree in Fulton County and DeKalb County as well, have been measured by whether they benefit whites or blacks most. Everything — how the airport is run, who is chosen police chief, school superintendent or chief executive for Grady Hospital, who gets government contracts — has been weighed against whether blacks are getting their fair share or whites are attempting to regain control.

"African Americans of the city of Atlanta have been the most progressive on issues of inclusion of anyone," Franklin told the group. "In our metropolitan area there have

## THE CHANGING FACE OF ATLANTA

The racial demographics of the city of Atlanta and the surrounding metro area have changed dramatically over the last two decades. The percentages below represent the breakdown the Census Bureau reported for 2005.

City/County	Black	White	Hispanic*
Atlanta	58.6	36.2	4.7
Fulton	42.4	48.4	7.5
DeKalb	55.2	33.5	9.1
Gwinnett	18.8	61.2	16.2
Cobb	21.6	65.5	10.5
Clayton	62.0	23.3	10.7

\* includes all races

been traditions of exclusion, so we are concerned that the loss of political power might undermine the progression of these social policies."

To paraphrase: When we got the power, we set the rules. If we lose power, the rules might change.

Sound familiar? If you're older than 50, you may remember white politicians saying essentially the same thing after the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965.

Franklin wasn't specific about what she means when she says the city is "progressive on issues of inclusion" but the current debate

in Clayton County — which may be the largest recipient of Atlanta's dispersed black population — might provide some indication.

There, blacks represent 62 percent of the population, but only in recent years has the county elected black leaders, including County Commission Chairman Eldrin Bell and County Sheriff Victor Hill. The NAACP president and other black leaders in Clayton are demanding that the county implement an affirmative action plan designed to award more contracts to minority-owned businesses.

If Clayton takes that step, it will be the first metro government to do so in years. Under Jackson, Atlanta was among the first cities to enact rules requiring set-asides in major contracts for minority subcontractors. But those rules were weakened as a result of a lawsuit in the 1990s. Bill Campbell, then mayor, famously likened the plaintiffs in the lawsuit to the Ku Klux Klan.

It didn't seem to matter that the set-asides were constitutionally questionable and cost the city millions. They also played an important role in Campbell running the most corrupt administration in the city's history. Under his watch contracts were awarded not based on whether they might help a struggling business, but how they might help Bill Campbell and his cronies.

As Atlanta's white politicians learned years ago — and its current band of black leaders may soon discover — it's hard to give up the power to make the rules.

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